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► GUDNI TH. JÓHANNESSON

## Did he matter? The Colourful Andrew Gilchrist and the first Cod War between Britain and Iceland, 1958–61

### Introduction

This paper is inspired by one of the grand debates in history – the role of individuals in the course of events. At the risk of gross oversimplification we have the preference for “structure” on the one hand and “contingency” or “chance” on the other.<sup>1</sup> The actions of Andrew Gilchrist, Britain’s Ambassador in Reykjavík at the beginning of the first “cod war” between Iceland and Britain in 1958, will be used here almost as a case study into the conflict between ‘structure’ and ‘chance.’ What difference, if any, did he make? Would not all have happened more or less as it did, regardless of his conduct? While this analysis is certainly not as sweeping as, say, an examination of the importance of Hitler or Stalin in the greater scheme of things, it is likelier to yield more concrete results for the following reasons:

- The ‘cod war,’ a dispute over fishing limits off Iceland which led to skirmishes between Icelandic gunboats and British trawlers and warships, was a comparatively small episode where, presumably, the effects of individuals are relatively easy to weigh and measure.
- Even so, there were also obvious underlying causes which made a conflict of some kind likely, regardless of the actions and behaviour of individuals in the short term.
- In Reykjavík, Andrew Gilchrist was an energetic servant of the Crown, while statesmen and officials in London usually had little interest in, or knowledge of, the dispute. Thus, he would seem to have been in a good position to influence the events.
- Icelandic observers have harshly criticised Gilchrist for his conduct during the dispute, blaming him for ‘arrogance’ and a total misunderstanding of political realities in Iceland. Allegedly, this had unfortunate effects on decision-making in London.<sup>2</sup>
- Two further ‘cod wars,’ which were akin to the first dispute in a number of basic ways, occurred when Gilchrist was not at all involved. We have what is virtually a historical ‘laboratory’ scenario, therefore, allowing us to compare the course of events with and without the interventions of the energetic Ambassador.

### “Structure”: The Origins of a Fishing Dispute

The underlying origins of the ‘cod war’ can be traced to the 19th century when Britain was the undisputed master of the high seas and the narrow three-mile rule of territorial waters was an important tenet of British supremacy. Around 1890, British trawlers began to work the rich fishing grounds around Iceland and in 1901, the authorities in Copenhagen, which then ruled the island, signed a treaty with London on that limit off its shores. In 1944, the Icelanders gained full independence from Denmark and soon began the quest for control over fish stocks in their adjacent waters, sincerely worried about overfishing, totally reliant on fishing for exports and encour-

raged by the fact that the law of the sea was developing in favour of coastal states. In 1949, the three-mile treaty was denounced and in two steps – in 1950 and 1952 – the Icelandic fishing zone was extended from three to four miles, and encompassed the wide bays and fjords of Iceland.<sup>3</sup>

The British trawling industry was furious and imposed a ban on the landings of iced fish which the Icelanders brought to British ports. This coercion certainly had the potential to hurt Iceland, which relied to a large degree on that market. London was not directly involved but hoped that the embargo would break the authorities in Reykjavík.<sup>4</sup> Although officials admitted in private that the sanctions probably contravened Britain's treaty obligations and domestic laws on 'criminal conspiracy',<sup>5</sup> acceptance of the Icelandic action was impossible for closely connected reasons which can be called the five 'p's' of pressure, prestige, principle, precedence and power:

First, the British distant-water trawling industry was an effective pressure group which wielded considerable power in the Fisheries Departments in Whitehall.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Britain's prestige was involved. How could a great naval power tolerate a clear infringement of its perceived fundamental interests? Thirdly, the general principle of narrow territorial waters would be weakened by acquiescence off Iceland.<sup>7</sup> Fourthly, the danger of negative precedence, especially in the North Atlantic, was ever present. It was imperative, as one worried official noted in the Foreign Office, to 'prevent the infection spreading to the Faroes and Greenland.'<sup>8</sup> Finally, the apparent presence of superior power made it inherently tempting to use it.

The ban bit at first but the Icelanders quickly found alternative outlets for their fish, not least in the Soviet Union which, by signing a huge oil-for-fish agreement with Iceland in 1953, decided to play on an emerging problem within the NATO.<sup>9</sup> The country was a founding member of the alliance and the US military base at Keflavik was deemed invaluable for western defences in the North Atlantic. Moscow-oriented socialists also polled a fifth of the vote in elections, however, and neutralist tendencies were strong. Hence, the eastward orientation caused great concern in Washington, and the United States put pressure on Britain to have the ban removed.<sup>10</sup>

Direct and indirect support from the world's superpowers proved stronger than intimidation in British ports. The coercion no longer worked, but what could then be done? Could London ignore pressure, accept slight to prestige, abandon a cherished principle and set a dangerous precedent? The question, however, could be put differently: What could be done but face the facts? The plain truth was that Iceland's pieces of power added up to more than Britain's. In 1955, Whitehall officials reacted to reports from Reykjavík about the possibility of further extensions by concluding that British trawlers should then be offered naval protection.<sup>11</sup> '[O]nly by using force at some stage,' said one of them, 'will we ever bring the Icelanders to accept a compromise settlement.'<sup>12</sup> Things were heating up.

The currents which went back to the 19th century, coupled with more recent developments after the Second World War, thus explain why a serious fishing dispute between Britain and Iceland was likely to break out. We realise, in other words, how a conflict came. It is a different task now to recount how *the 'cod war'* of 1958 broke out and it is here that Andrew Gilchrist enters the scene.

### "What about Andrew Gilchrist?" An Eager Diplomat is Promoted to Iceland

In the early 1950s, two Ministers served in the British Legation in Reykjavík. First, the 'light-weight' John Dee Greenway had been given Iceland as his last post before retirement.<sup>13</sup> Although an intelligent man, he was far from industrious and as the dispute over the fishing limit was simmering, both the Icelanders and foreign diplomats in Reykjavík wondered why Britain kept such a 'weak' man there.<sup>14</sup> When Greenway belatedly concerned himself with the conflict, he sided completely with the Icelanders, much to the chagrin of officials in Whitehall. The Minister was

sidelined and could only resort to marking Foreign Office telegrams about the rigid British stance with such expressions as 'pooh!' 'why?' and '!!!'<sup>15</sup>

In early 1953, Greenway was replaced by James Thyne Henderson, a man of a slightly higher standing in the Diplomatic Service who was, as he put it himself, hurried off to Reykjavík to 'do something.'<sup>16</sup> He had clearly been briefed about the need to stand up to the Icelanders and did so at first, but soon came to call for acquiescence to their wishes. The new Minister had no sympathy for the Icelandic cause but grudgingly admitted that the correlation of power in the conflict would ultimately benefit Iceland.<sup>17</sup> Henderson never said so to the Icelanders, however, and they in turn disliked his apparent obstinacy and toughness.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the recommendations from Reykjavík were not welcomed in London. 'Mr. Henderson seems to argue,' one official complained, 'that because the Icelanders are not prepared to yield we must at all costs get the problem settled at this end.'<sup>19</sup>

As with Greenway, Henderson underestimated the constraints on British decision-making and both of them may also have suffered from 'localitis,' the tendency of some diplomats to sympathise overly much with the views of their host country.<sup>20</sup> But most importantly, Greenway's and Henderson's correct estimates of the options open did not jibe with the prevalent perceptions and prejudices in London. It is indeed tempting to view Whitehall discussions on Iceland as a symptom of 'groupthink,' the established concept in decision-making theory which is used to describe a group's thinking 'when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.'<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, government ministers and officials often argued about what to do but they all agreed that the new Icelandic regulations could not be accepted. The 'group' that Whitehall represented disregarded negative input and had no place for unconventional thinking.<sup>22</sup>

Would Andrew Gilchrist conform more to the customary outlook in London? He was born in 1910, entered the old British colonial service in 1933, and was based in Bangkok when Japan entered the Second World War in 1941. Gilchrist was interned for eight months but then released. Three years later he joined the Special Operations Executive and saw active service in India. After the war he reapplied to join the Foreign Office and served in consular posts in Bangkok, Stuttgart and Singapore before arriving in Iceland in the late summer of 1956.<sup>23</sup> By then, a left-wing coalition had come to power in Iceland, not only committed to another extension of the fishing limit but ostensibly determined to expel the Americans from the island. The removal of the landing ban had become more urgent than ever before.<sup>24</sup> Iceland was a promotion for the relatively young diplomat who was not in line to be in charge of a mission.<sup>25</sup> Apparently, Gilchrist was sent to Reykjavík because at least two more senior diplomats had rejected the offer. 'What about Andrew Gilchrist?' an exasperated figure on the Foreign Office Selection Board is said to have queried, remembering that he was a keen angler so surely he knew a fair bit about fish. And had he not specialised in communism when he was Consul General in Stuttgart in the early 1950s?<sup>26</sup> The post was Gilchrist's – a historical 'chance' indeed.

### **"You do not fully accept the views on the local situation." Gilchrist Learns the Realities of Reporting from Reykjavík**

The new minister's first impressions of Reykjavík consisted of verbal abuse which teenagers hurled at British sailors on land leave.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding his anger over such treatment, he immediately understood that the ineffectual landing ban had to go. There was nothing 'humiliating' about a graceful defeat, Gilchrist emphasised in October 1956: 'Surely the humiliation lies in the regrettable but total failure of our big stick, not in the acknowledgement of failure in a gentlemanly way.'<sup>28</sup>



Andrew Gilchrist, Minister and Ambassador to Iceland, 1956–59. Gilchrist later received a knighthood and wrote a book on his stay in Iceland, called “Cod Wars and How to Lose Them.” (Brain Holt Photograph Collection, Reykjavík)

Two years earlier, low-key negotiations on an end to the sanctions had begun in Paris, under the auspices of OEEC, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. In early 1956, they had almost succeeded but domestic complications in Iceland and Britain prevented a solution. The trawler-owners, *de facto* spokesmen of the industry, had a ‘veto’ on any proposal as one member of the Foreign Office privately admitted.<sup>29</sup> By fall, they still showed a reluctance to lift the embargo unless Iceland pledged not to extend the limit again for some specified period. That would never happen and Gilchrist was appalled when he read reports of the stalemate, wanting to tell the concerned officials in London that he did not ‘see or sense anything to indicate that you told the trawler-owners straight out that the maintenance of the ban was contrary to the interests of Her Majesty’s Government.’ He decided not to send these thoughts but still wondered to himself why his advice had not been heeded:

- a) You do not fully accept the views on the local situation which I have been putting forward from Reykjavík.
- b) There are wider factors with which I am unacquainted.
- c) The trawler-owners are too tough to be subject to Foreign Office influence.<sup>30</sup>

Gilchrist was finding out the lot of a low-ranking diplomat in a marginal outpost: He was neither listened to nor let in on much. In November 1956 the ban was finally lifted after the owners realised that the Icelanders would not grant them the guarantee they were after and that the British authorities had grown very irritated over their intransigence. Afterwards, Gilchrist tried to claim much more credit for the settlement than was his due, quoting the Foreign Minister of Iceland, Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson, as saying that the dispute was ‘not settled in Paris. It could never have been settled in Paris. It was settled here, in Reykjavík, by you and me.’<sup>31</sup> This exaggeration was characteristic of a proud and aspiring envoy who wanted to make a difference. He hardly had anything to do with the final result and the frustration at the time was more accurate. On the other hand, Gilchrist had quickly gained a good knowledge of Icelandic realities. Already in the fall of 1956 he was warning that ‘we may be in for more trouble on limits sooner or later—I have never expected anything else.’<sup>32</sup> Again, however, he was to find out that his words fell on deaf ears in London.

### “I would quite like to see ... what our line is likely to be.” Gilchrist and the Geneva Conference, February–April, 1958

In 1957, the Icelandic government decided to postpone any action on the fishing limit until the international community had discussed the issue. In February 1958, the first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea began in Geneva and for Britain the occasion provided an opportunity, apart from the general prospect of a world-wide agreement on territorial waters, to establish a lasting settlement off Iceland. On the eve of the conference, Gilchrist (now an ambas-

sador after the upgrade of the British and Icelandic missions in Reykjavík and London) accurately predicted that '[t]he only place where a bridge can be built is at Geneva. If we don't build a bridge, we shall be confronted with unilateral extensions, as sure as eggs is eggs.'<sup>33</sup>

International currents had continued to flow in Iceland's favour. Some South American states wanted national jurisdiction to as many as 200 miles, the communist bloc advocated twelve-mile territorial waters and many newly independent nations considered narrow limits a colonial tool to continue exploitation of their resources.<sup>34</sup> In late 1957, Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, Senior Legal Adviser in the Foreign Office, warned that the three-mile rule would never be ratified at the conference. The Fisheries Departments seemed willing to accept a six-mile compromise but the Admiralty and the Chiefs of Staff insisted that Britain must maintain the three-mile limit, or at least the rights for overflying and innocent passage up to that line.<sup>35</sup>

Gilchrist heard little of the ongoing debates in Whitehall about the British stance. 'I would quite like to see an occasional bit of paper on what our line is likely to be at the conference,' he meekly complained at one stage and got most of his information about developments at Geneva from Icelandic newspapers.<sup>36</sup> As expected, the event went badly for Britain. Canada offered the most realistic compromise, a three-mile territorial sea with an additional nine-mile exclusive fisheries zone. The British delegation stuck to the old three-mile rule, however, and only reluctantly offered an alternative late in the day: six-mile territorial waters with certain maritime rights up to three miles from shore. This was not bridge-building. From Reykjavík, Gilchrist suggested that Britain should instead accept the Canadian proposal – if the Icelanders declared that while they were determined to assert their right over twelve miles, they would respect the interests of other states and only extend to six miles for a trial period of two years or so. He added that even this offer might well fail to placate the Icelandic authorities.<sup>37</sup> Too much water had already flowed under the (non-existent) bridge.

Andrew Gilchrist accepted that the Icelandic point of view could not determine general policy on territorial waters. He did his duty to accurately judge the mood in Iceland and his formula was in fact very similar to the deal which Britain accepted in 1961, after a bitter 'cod war.' The problem was not that he was ahead of his time, but that British policy-makers lagged behind, pulled back by the five 'p's' of pressure, prestige, principle, precedence and power.

International unity proved impossible at Geneva. On April 27, the conference ended in failure as far as the width of territorial waters was concerned, and in London the self-criticism immediately began. 'The three-mile limit is a dead duck,' one official asserted a few weeks later and Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice pointed out that the six-mile offer, the main element in Britain's battle plan, had always been a 'non-starter.'<sup>38</sup> In legal literature, the British performance during the conference has been cited to support the contention that 'the lesson of the Sibylline books is to accept the possible when it is still timely.'<sup>39</sup> The conservatism at Geneva is also a small example of a greater theme in Britain's post-war history: the reluctance to adapt swiftly to changed interests and capabilities.<sup>40</sup> It was small wonder, therefore, that an inexperienced Ambassador in tiny Iceland could do nothing about it.

### "I hope if we threaten we can perform." Gilchrist and the Decision to Use Force

After the failure at Geneva, a conflict was almost inevitable, as Gilchrist had correctly noted. Within the Icelandic government, the communist/socialist People's Alliance demanded an immediate extension to twelve miles. Although the centre-left parties in the coalition – the Social Democrats and the Progressive Party – wanted to leave scope for talks with Britain and perhaps temporary concessions, they would also insist on some recognition of a twelve-mile limit. The same went for the right-wing Independence Party in opposition.<sup>41</sup>



What could then be done? Back in 1955, naval protection had of course been suggested in Whitehall but the prospect of implementation had not been as real at that time. And on closer look, the use or threat of force against an ally in the NATO seemed out of the question. 'I don't suppose for a moment that Her Majesty's Government will try such a policy,' Gilchrist maintained in early 1957.<sup>42</sup> About a year later, Thomas Brimelow in the Northern Department of the Foreign Office also argued against the involvement of the Royal Navy in a struggle against the Icelanders.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the dismissal of firm action, Gilchrist had certainly not become a great supporter of the rulers in Reykjavík and when Icelandic newspapers carried reports on British declarations at Geneva about the determination to defend the three-mile rule, he was incredulous, but pleased. 'Are we really making official threats?' he telegraphed to London in mid-April: 'I hope if we threaten we can perform. Nothing would please me better.'<sup>44</sup> The Foreign Office quickly pointed out that the news from Geneva was exaggerated and on reflection, Gilchrist was to add that he simply could not see the United States 'allowing' Britain to apply coercion against a country where it had such important strategic interests.<sup>45</sup> After all, the American administration had forced Britain to back down over Suez two years earlier. Furthermore, Gilchrist's almost juvenile joy over the prospect of British boldness highlights how little he was involved in British decision-making. It also turned out that his disbelief was unfounded. On May 12, despite the obvious geopolitical disadvantages, the Foreign Office recommended that if the Icelandic fishing limit was extended the Royal Navy would sail to the disputed waters to protect British trawlers from harassment by Icelandic gunboats.<sup>46</sup>

Never did Gilchrist's opinions or despatches figure largely in the reaching of that conclusion in the Foreign Office. On May 12, the day of the final decision there, he even wrote that 'the arguments against the warlike action I presume to be still far too strong.'<sup>47</sup> And it must have galled the ambitious Ambassador when Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a senior official in the Foreign Office, wrote later in the month that although his 'vivid' despatches were appreciated, would he 'constantly bear in mind number and magnitude of urgent problems confronting us at present and keep telegrams to minimum number and length.'<sup>48</sup> At the highest levels, there was little time to examine a particular predicament in every detail.<sup>49</sup> Vague knowledge and preconceptions had to suffice, coupled with self-interested appeals from domestic pressure groups. The advice of the most knowledgeable officials was ignored, or even berated. In the Foreign Office, for instance, Brimelow never liked the possible application of an old-fashioned 'gunboat diplomacy' off Iceland.<sup>50</sup> So Gilchrist alone was not overlooked. It was more the rule than the exception, more 'structure' than 'chance.'

On May 24, the government in Reykjavík announced that on September 1 the fishing limit would be extended to twelve miles. In response, the British authorities publicly declared on June 3 that they would not recognise the act and send warships to protect British vessels 'on the high seas.'<sup>51</sup> Britain was going to perform and Gilchrist was pleased. But the decision was definitely not his.

### **"The Prime Minister says that I have misled him." Gilchrist and the Immediate Causes of the "Cod War"**

Andrew Gilchrist indisputably possessed a combative character. '[N]o one ever doubted Gilchrist's courage,' a colleague later said.<sup>52</sup> But he was 'rude' and 'arrogant,' in the words of an Icelandic official who was based in the London Embassy during the conflict.<sup>53</sup> Ólafur Thors, the leader of the Independence Party – both the largest and most pro-Western in Iceland – also developed a special dislike for 'that idiot' Andrew Gilchrist.<sup>54</sup> Others have spoken fondly of Gilchrist

and, generally speaking, he certainly liked and admired the Icelandic people.<sup>55</sup> Yet he was often provocative and controversial. 'He wears an Edward VII beard and ... dresses in the tweediest of tweeds,' said the Canadian Ambassador to Iceland after a visit to the country. 'He is a most entertaining conversationalist but perhaps a little too fond of the well-turned phrase to please the rather stolid Icelanders.'<sup>56</sup> Gilchrist would tell British journalists who visited Iceland that all fishermen were born liars, and he deliberately encouraged the falsehood that the coast guard vessels would unhesitatingly open fire on British trawlers within the twelve-mile limit!<sup>57</sup> But did it matter? Thors, for example, had led the four-mile fight in the early 1950s and was always determined to extend the limits further. He was not egged on by Gilchrist's disposition. In the trawling ports in Britain, rumours about trigger-happy Icelanders were rife and would have been so even if he had remained silent.

What about the claim that Gilchrist sent erroneous reports from Reykjavík? First of all, he is alleged to have recommended strong-hand tactics which would compel the Icelanders to back down.<sup>58</sup> Again, it may be recalled that Gilchrist found it hard to believe that Britain would or could threaten the use of force off Iceland and when such a decision was made he was nowhere near. Furthermore, in the months between Geneva and the 'cod war' in September, he vacillated between belligerence and benevolence. For instance, he again suggested a *de facto* compromise whereby Iceland would declare a twelve-mile limit but allow traditional fishing nations to work up to six miles for the next four years – a solution much on the lines of the 'cod war' settlement in 1961.<sup>59</sup> Conversely, his aggressive ideas, which will be discussed later, were usually so wild and impractical that they were never taken seriously in London.

Another charge against Gilchrist is that he misread the political situation in Iceland. He is said to have maintained that the drive for extended fishing limits was a communist ploy and that if only the People's Alliance would be kicked out of government and the Independents assumed power, an amicable solution would be found.<sup>60</sup> This is wrong. 'On fishery limits no Icelander is our friend,' Gilchrist underlined at the end of the Geneva conference, and in early August he emphasised that no political party in Iceland was willing to actually withdraw the twelve-mile decree of May.<sup>61</sup> In fact, those who mainly fanned the hopes of a happy ending in the summer of 1958 were Icelandic politicians and officials. The Foreign Minister, the Social Democrat Gudmundsson, strove for the collapse of the coalition, co-operation with the Independence Party and negotiations within the NATO on temporary concessions within the twelve-mile limit, and Hans G. Andersen, Iceland's permanent representative at the Alliance's headquarters in Paris, clearly disliked his government's intransigence.<sup>62</sup> In late August, when the moment of truth was only days away and a fleet of four British warships was ready to sail for Iceland, Andersen indicated that a compromise on an initial six-mile extension was not out of the question.<sup>63</sup> A peace treaty of sorts was hammered out in Paris and hopes were raised in London. But they were quickly thwarted. After a meeting with Gudmundsson on August 28, Gilchrist telegraphed to the Foreign Office: 'I think we are in a mess. The Minister for Foreign Affairs says quite specifically that [the] text is unacceptable as it stands, and that it is not at all in accordance with his instructions to Hans Andersen.'<sup>64</sup> This news caused deep disappointment in London. Royal Navy warships would now be pitted against the diminutive Icelandic gunboats. Fortuitously, a final ray of hope appeared on August 31 when Gilchrist could ascertain in Reykjavík that if a trawler refused to obey coast guard orders inside twelve miles and immediately appealed for naval assistance, 'no boarding attempt will be made.'<sup>65</sup> This analysis must have pleased Macmillan. His battle plan at this late stage seemed to involve a robust but fair establishment of British rights with the option of a dignified retreat towards the last compromise proposal from Paris.<sup>66</sup>

This was not to happen. On September 1, the twelve-mile regulation took effect in Iceland and on the following morning the gunboats repeatedly attempted to arrest British trawlers, ignoring directives from Reykjavík about initial caution. Sailors removed an Icelandic party from one ves-



sel and trawlermen on another used boathooks, rope-ends and the like to thwart another boarding attempt. A wave of fury swept over Iceland. All chances of a compromise were gone for good, it seemed.<sup>67</sup> How could this have happened? '[W]e are already reaping around Iceland the consequences of the orthodox legal doctrine which we upheld at Geneva,' the able Thomas Brimelow pointed out.<sup>68</sup> In other words, 'structural' reasons lay behind the virtually inevitable clash. It is true, nonetheless, that – while a conflict was almost bound to happen – in the late summer of 1958 individuals were determining how exactly it came about. And Macmillan blamed Gilchrist. 'The Prime Minister says that I have misled him,' the Ambassador said in October when the impasse was complete.<sup>69</sup> But Gilchrist had been misled just as much as Macmillan. Gilchrist had always warned that talks with the Icelanders, including the probing in Paris, could well prove useless and he could not be expected to foresee that, once the standoff in the disputed waters had begun, the coast guard captains would almost immediately interpret their orders very freely. And to reiterate, Gilchrist was not a main mover. In early August, he privately complained about the 'nonsense which the Foreign Office and our people in Paris had cooked up for me.'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, at the end of the month he wondered, clearly bitten by bad experience, if he should bother to arrange a meeting with the Icelandic Prime Minister and send home a report on it: 'For the record, who would read it?'<sup>71</sup>

Macmillan's unfair criticism could have had unfortunate consequences for Gilchrist's career. Then again, the ambitious Ambassador did himself no good by what was to follow, his most infamous act in Iceland. It was almost bound to end badly, for it involved the curious but volatile mixture of Gilchrist's impetuous temperament, Icelandic nationalism, drunken teenagers, Scottish bagpipes and journalistic craving for hot news.

### "For God's sake, Ambassador, don't provoke the people." Gilchrist's Fateful Moment of Fame in Reykjavík

At noon on September 2, Reykjavík radio reported on the skirmishes which had occurred that morning between the coast guard and British trawlers and warships off Iceland. Word immediately spread that in the evening a demonstration would take place outside the British Ambassador's residence. Instead of lying low, Gilchrist now felt that he had been given a good opportunity to show the world the brutality of the communist-led Icelanders, thus countering the propaganda that they were poor, innocent fishermen who were being bullied by Britain. He threw a dinner party and invited a select group of foreign journalists who had flocked to Iceland but – apart from the lucky ones near the scenes at sea – were still desperately short of 'hard news.' While Gilchrist was excited, Peter Kidson, another member of the British Embassy, feared the worst. 'For God's sake, Ambassador, don't provoke the people,' he pleaded in the afternoon, to no avail. 'I will not be careful!' the Ambassador reportedly insisted.<sup>72</sup>

By dusk, a crowd of a few hundred (some said up to a thousand) had gathered in front of the residence. But the people were disappointingly timid and Eddie Gilmore, the eminent American reporter, is to have complained: 'Mr. Ambassador, there ain't no action! Looks like you brought us here under false pretences. No goddam headlines for A.P. out of this serenade.' Gilchrist had to take the initiative. Within a minute, the Edinburgh City Police Pipe Band were playing full blast on the house gramophone *The Barren Rocks of Aden*.<sup>73</sup> The protesters felt grossly provoked. Some entered the house garden and many windows were broken, amid shouts that 'Vikings never give up!' This, however, was not a real riot with great significance for the British cause, as Gilchrist had hoped. 'Often the jeering struck me as half-hearted,' one of the journalists reported, 'and no real violence was attempted by the crowd, which for the most part was composed of very young people, many of them drunk.'<sup>74</sup> Another contention by Gilchrist, that the

communists were the driving force in the protests, was also incorrect. The most pro-Western of people were present and the People's Alliance actually deplored the episode, as did the other political parties.<sup>75</sup>

After the outbreak of the 'cod war' and Gilchrist's provocative behaviour, he became something of a persona non grata in Reykjavík. He was not invited to government functions and most politicians shunned his company.<sup>76</sup> '[N]o politician could risk his future in being seen with him,' the Canadian Ambassador to Iceland remarked after a visit to the country.<sup>77</sup> Thus, Gilchrist had reduced what little capability he had to influence events. He made a bad situation worse and there are some indications that it did harm his career prospects. In the summer of 1959, he privately remarked in Reykjavík that 'the younger set in the Foreign Office' wanted him to retain his post until the 'cod war' had been brought to a close, whereas the 'seniors appeared to be against him and wanted a change.'<sup>78</sup> In his memoirs on the Icelandic assignment, Gilchrist also noted somewhat ruefully that 'Ministers – on whom in the end my promotion depended – were led to regard me as some sort of Caledonian madman who went round in a kilt playing the bagpipes under a hail of bricks.'<sup>79</sup> At the end of 1959, Gilchrist left Reykjavík and became a Consul General in Chicago.

Icelandic observers, both then and later, have tended to view this move as a 'demotion,' or even a 'clear humiliation.'<sup>80</sup> This is not true. First of all, Gilchrist was so proud that he indicated that when Britain accepted defeat in the dispute with Iceland, he would rather be somewhere else.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the posts in Chicago and Reykjavík were of equal rank in the British Foreign Service. It is true that Gilchrist no longer held the post of Ambassador, but he had not arrived as one in Reykjavík and that assignment was clearly an elevation for him. On balance, it is fair to say that after his tumultuous stay in Reykjavík, Gilchrist was neither promoted nor demoted. After Chicago, however, he became Ambassador to Indonesia, a significant post indeed, and he then ended his career as Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, always a prestigious position. In short, few, if any, of Britain's representatives in Reykjavík have reached as high a post in the British Foreign Service as Sir Andrew Gilchrist, despite his antics in the first days of the 'cod war' in 1958.

### **"We ought not be deterred by fear of a little bloodshed on the way." Gilchrist's Suggested "Solutions" to the "Cod War"**

Finally, it may be wondered what would have happened if Gilchrist had been able to determine British policy. At times, his boldness, ambition and pride clouded his judgement and led him to suggest the most unrealistic and provocative policies. In May 1958, when the British Cabinet was deciding on naval protection, unbeknownst to the Ambassador in Reykjavík, he suggested that 'we should catch an Icelandic gunboat in the act, disable her by non-violent means, (query: shoot her rudder off), tow her to England, and condemn her for piracy in an Admiralty Court.'<sup>82</sup> Nothing would have been more likely to unite the Icelanders against Britain (and the NATO, by implication), and both allies and adversaries would have condemned the government in London for outdated and imperialistic bullying. The same applied to Gilchrist's next suggestion: that British banks, where both the Icelandic authorities and individual companies were in constant debt, demand of these customers that they 'bring their accounts into balance by September 1.'<sup>83</sup>

When the 'cod war' had begun and the risk of violent clashes at sea was clearly evident, Gilchrist felt that Britain should hold her course, continue to defend the trawlers and not be cowed by the 'fear of a little bloodshed on the way.'<sup>84</sup> A short while later, he also suggested that in retaliation for the arrest of a British trawler, Britain should seize the cargo-passenger liner Gullfoss, the pride of Iceland's merchant fleet, next time she arrived in a British port. Alterna-

tively, Icelandic aircraft could be detained.<sup>85</sup> Again, it is easy to imagine the undiluted fury which would have swept through Iceland had such a course been followed. And it must be added that these outbursts by Gilchrist were more the exception than the rule. Usually he understood the constraints on British power and Icelandic strength in the conflict better than the decision-makers in London.

## Conclusion: Gilchrist and the three “cod wars”

The first ‘cod war’ ended in 1961. Britain accepted the twelve-mile limit in return for limited fishing rights inside it for the next three years and a guarantee from the Icelandic centre-right government, which had then assumed power, that if Iceland extended her limit again in contravention of British wishes, the parties would refer the matter to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. Despite these provisions, the outcome was a ‘[m]assive Icelandic victory,’ in Gilchrist’s opinion.<sup>86</sup> In 1971, a new, left-wing regime came to power in Reykjavík and declared itself unbound by the pledge about a referral to the International Court. The following year, the Icelandic fishing limit was extended to 50 miles. Britain protested and sent civilian vessels to assist British trawlers in the disputed waters. No warships arrived on the scene until 1973, however, after a winter of fairly successful harassment by Icelandic coast guard vessels. Not surprisingly, a mob of a few thousand young Icelanders gathered outside the British Embassy, smashed every window and caused great damage to the property.<sup>87</sup> This time, of course, Gilchrist had not been around to ‘incite’ the crowd. The Ambassador, John McKenzie, was a modest and quiet man who consciously tried to lie low when fevers ran high in Reykjavík.

This second ‘cod war’ ended in late 1973 with a compromise which was, again, rather in favour of the Icelanders. But the final conflict was still to come. In 1975, a new government in Iceland extended the limit to 200 miles. Although the international community was moving towards the codification of such extensive national jurisdiction, the Icelanders were ‘jumping the gun,’ as it were. For the third time in less than 20 years, the Royal Navy sailed north to protect British trawlers. This proved to be the hardest conflict, with regular rammings and collisions between the British protection vessels and the ships of the Icelandic coast guard. Kenneth East, an extremely able diplomat, could do nothing to prevent the intensification of the dispute and in February 1976 Iceland discontinued diplomatic relations with Britain. East had to leave Reykjavík. Again, Gilchrist was nowhere near, which serves to support the theory that he was not to blame for the outbreak of the first ‘cod war.’ To sum up, he was simply an insignificant quantity in the whole equation. The outcome was the same, with or without him.

This is not to say that individuals do not matter in the great structural scheme of things, but there were others who mattered more: Prime Minister Macmillan and his Cabinet in Britain, for instance, and politicians in Iceland. Therefore, the survey of Gilchrist’s involvement in the first ‘cod war’ of 1958–61 casts doubt on the assertion, to quote Lord Strang who headed the Foreign Office in the early 1950s, that ‘the head of a British diplomatic mission is far from being, in his negotiating role, the mere relay station or ventriloquist’s dummy that many people suppose him to be.’<sup>88</sup> In fact, he (the notion that a woman could be a head of a diplomatic mission was not recognised at the time) may be said to resemble such a ‘dummy.’ The role of a diplomat remains important but it is that of a messenger, not a mover. In other words, the diplomat is a ‘pathetic hero’ in international relations, uninvolved in the internal process of decision-making and bound by the impassivity of the diplomatic practise.<sup>89</sup> The course of the first ‘cod war’ between Iceland and Britain would have been very similar regardless of the actions and characteristics of Her Majesty’s Ambassador in Reykjavík. It could have been Micky Mouse or Machiavelli; it would not have made that much of a difference.

## Notes:

- 1 For the former view, see for instance John Tosh's words that 'the historian who maintains an exclusive focus on the thoughts and actions of individuals (as diplomatic historians all too often do) is likely to find no shape, and to see instead only a chaotic sequence of accident and blunder.' John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, 1984), 135. For the latter, see for instance John Young's view that 'however much our understanding of international developments has been improved by looking at the "realities behind diplomacy," history is also about contingencies, the coming together of particular forces, personalities and events at particular times.' John W. Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), 228.
- 2 This view is mainly put forward by Hannes Jónsson, a retired diplomat who was based in London during the dispute. See Hannes Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk* (Reykjavík, 1994), 110-114, and *Friends in Conflict. The Anglo-Icelandic Cod Wars and the Law of the Sea* (London, 1982), 91-99. The critique is supported in Jón Th. Thór, *British Trawlers and Iceland 1919-1976* (Esbjerg, 1995), 187-189, and Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, "'Thau eru svo eftirsótt Íslandsmid..." Samningavidræður Íslendinga og Breta í thorskastríðinu 1958-61,' *Saga*, Vol. 37, 1999, 68-69.
- 3 For an overview, see Jón Th. Thór, *Landhelgi Íslands 1901-1952* (Reykjavík, 1991), and David Ólafsson, *Saga landhelgismálsins. Baráttan fyrir stækkun fiskveiðilögsögunnar í 12 mílur* (Reykjavík, 1999), 45-82.
- 4 National Archives, Kew, London [hereafter NA]: FO371/100633, Johnson minute, 29.9.1952.
- 5 NA: FO371/100639, Muskett to Simpson, 11.12.1952. FO371/100639, Fitzmaurice minute, 12.12.1952. Also Jónsson, *Friends in Conflict*, 63-64.
- 6 E.g. NA: T165/247, Amending Note, April 1950, to Civil estimates, Class VI., 8 (1948-49), Main Note (October 1948), 'Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.' There were two Fisheries Departments in Whitehall, one in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the other in the Scottish Home Department.
- 7 E.g. NA: ADM1/25859, Wyatt to Abercrombie, 10.3.1950.
- 8 NA: FO371/100630, Faber minute, 7.5.1952.
- 9 See Jón Ólafsson, *Kæru félagar. Íslenskir sósíalistar og Sovétríkin 1920-1960* (Reykjavík, 1999), 164-173.
- 10 E.g. NA: FO371/111535, US Aide-Memoire, 18.11.1954, and FO371/122491, Ward minute, 11.6.1956.
- 11 NA: FO371/116441, Ward and Kirkpatrick minutes, 9.3. and 11.3.1955, and MAF209/1519, Leach minute, 24.8.1955.
- 12 NA: FO371/116448, Ward minute, 15.12.1955.
- 13 A Foreign Office colleague gave this description. See a letter from an anonymous diplomat to the author, 20.12.2000. See also Greenway's autobiography, *Fish, Fowl and Foreign Lands*, (London, 1950).
- 14 National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, USA [hereafter NARA]: RG263, Records of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Murphy Collection on International Communism 1917-1958. Iceland, Box 126. '4201 Iceland 1948,' Trimble Memorandum, 4.8.1948. Also Foreign Ministry Archives, Oslo [hereafter UD]: 31.11/60/II, Rysst minute, 16.4.1952.
- 15 NA: FO962/21, FO to Reykjavík, 20.11.1952 and 11.12.1952. Admittedly, it is not certain whether Greenway wrote these remarks, but surely nobody else in the Legation would have done so.
- 16 NA: FO371/106348, Henderson to Hohler, 31.3.1953. Henderson had been *chargé d'affaires* in Helsinki, First Secretary in Tokyo and Consul-General in Houston.
- 17 See for instance NA: FO371/106350, Henderson to Hohler, 7.7.1953.
- 18 Author's interview with Hilmar Foss, 6.9.2002, and NA: FO371/134963, Gilchrist to FO, 13.5.1958.
- 19 NA: FO371/106350, Statham minute, 19.9.1953. Also FO371/116443, Duffy minute, 16.6.1955.
- 20 Martin Mayer, *The Diplomats* (New York, 1983), 18 and Raymond Seitz, *Over Here* (London, 1998), 13. He calls the condition 'clentitis.'
- 21 Irving L. Janis, *Grouthink. Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2nd ed. 1982), 9. Also Jonathan M. Roberts, *Decision-Making during International Crises* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 143-152. For a summary of a critique on Janis's grouphink model, see Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Stanford, 1990), 241-246, 256-259.
- 22 A comparison may be made with Russell Bretherton, Britain's representative at the talks which led to the Messina Conference in 1955 and the formation of the European Economic Community. Infamously, he was marginalized in Whitehall and outdated ideas about Britain's strength and options certainly influenced top-level thinking on Europe in the Foreign Office. See James Ellison, *Threatening Europe. Britain and the Creation of the European Community, 1955-58* (Basingstoke, 2000), 15-21.
- 23 *The Times*, 11.3.1993 (Gilchrist's obituary).
- 24 For the strategic aspect, see Thór Whitehead, *The Ally Who Came in from the Cold. A Survey of Icelandic Foreign Policy 1946-1956* (Reykjavík, 1998), and Valur Ingimundarson, *The Struggle for Western Integration. Iceland, the United States, and NATO during the First Cold War* (Oslo, 1999). In the fall of 1956, the government decided to abandon demands for the removal of the United States military presence.
- 25 See for instance Foreign Office List 1957 (London, [no date]), 3, 264-265.
- 26 Andrew Gilchrist, *Cod Wars and How to Lose Them* (Edinburgh, 1978), 1.
- 27 UD: 31.11/60/V, Rysst to Foreign Ministry, 2.10.1956.
- 28 NA: FO371/122523, Gilchrist to FO, 2.10.1956.

- 29 NA: MAF209/1484, Savage minute, 5.1.1956.
- 30 NA: FO962/28, Gilchrist to Given, 3.10.1956 (cancelled).
- 31 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 14.2.1958. Also Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 67.
- 32 NA: FO371/122528, Gilchrist to Given, 29.11.1956.
- 33 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 14.2.1958.
- 34 For an overview of the conference, see for example W.W. Bishop, "The 1958 Geneva Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources of the High Seas," *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 62, No. 7, 1962, 1206-1229.
- 35 NA: FO371/127722, minutes from the interdepartmental 'Territorial Waters Committee' meeting, 4.12.1957, DEFE4/103, C.O.S. (58) 8th meeting, 23.1.1958, and CAB21/2762, Trend minute for Prime Minister, 17.2.1958.
- 36 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Joy, 20.1.1958, and FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 17.4.1958.
- 37 NA: FO371/134957, Gilchrist to FO, 9.4.1958
- 38 NA: FO371/133750, Wright minute, 1.7.1958, and FO371/133746, Fitzmaurice, 'Report to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on the International Conference on the Law of the Sea,' July 1958.
- 39 Edward McWhinney, "The Codifying Conference as an Instrument of International Law-Making: From the 'Old' Law of the Sea to the 'New,'" *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1975, 309.
- 40 For a critical view, see Correlli Barnett, *The Verdict of Peace. Britain Between Her Yesterday and the Future* (London, 2001), and Michael Blackwell, *Clinging to Grandeur. British Attitudes and Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Second World War* (Westport, Connecticut, 1993). For more balanced assessments, see Richard Little, "The Study of British Foreign Policy" in Michael Smith, Steve Smith and Brian White (eds.), *British Foreign Policy. Tradition, Change and Transformation* (London, 1988), 252-253, and John Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), 145 and 159.
- 41 See Davis, *Iceland Extends*, 51-70.
- 42 NA: FO371/128766, Gilchrist to Given, 2.2.1957.
- 43 NA: FO371/134955, Brimelow memorandum, 8.1.1958. Also FO371/134957/NL1351/55, Joy memorandum, 15.3.1958.
- 44 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 15.4.1958.
- 45 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 18.4.1958.
- 46 NA: CAB129/92, C(58)99, 'Iceland: Fishery Limit,' Lloyd memorandum, 12.5.1958.
- 47 NA: FO371/134962, Gilchrist to FO, 12.5.1958.
- 48 NA: FO371/134966, Gore-Booth to Gilchrist, 22.5.1958.
- 49 Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Inner Circle* (London, 1959), 259, and R.G.S. Brown and D.R. Steel, *The Administrative Process in Britain* (London, 2nd ed. 1979), 207-208.
- 50 RA: 55.DAN.31/VII, Ambassador Kronmann, London, to Oldenburg, 4.6.1958.
- 51 Jónsson, *Friends in Conflict*, 85-86.
- 52 *The Times*, 11.3.1993 (Gilchrist's obituary). Also author's interviews with Sir James Cable, 25.1.2000, and David Summerhayes, 22.11.2002.
- 53 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 110-112.
- 54 Matthías Johannessen, *Ólafur Thors II* (Reykjavík, 1981), 352-353. Also Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 44-46, 100-101.
- 55 E.g. Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 12-20, and 116-122. Also *Morgunbladid* (Icelandic daily), 17.11.1994.
- 56 National Archives of Canada, Ottawa [hereafter NA-CAN]: RG25/3993/10009-40, Canadian Embassy in Oslo to Ottawa, 23.10.1959.
- 57 *News Chronicle*, 29.8.1958, and *Daily Express*, 30.5.1958.
- 58 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 104, and Guðmundsson, "'Thau eru svo eftirsótt Íslandsmid...'", 68.
- 59 NA: FO371/134972, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 19.6.1958.
- 60 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 104, 110. See also Johannessen, *Ólafur Thors II*, 353-354.
- 61 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 24.4.1958, and FO371/134979, Gilchrist to FO, 8.8.1958.
- 62 For Guðmundsson, see for instance his private papers, in possession of Guðmundur I. Guðmundsson, Reykjavík: Guðmundsson to Stefán Jóhann Stefánsson, 8.6. and 3.7.1958. Also NARA: RG59/740B.00/6-2458, Muccio, Reykjavík, to Secretary of State, 24.6.1958, and NA: FO371/134973, Gilchrist to FO, 1.7.1958. For Andersen, see private papers of David Ólafsson, Central Bank of Iceland Archives: Andersen report on the Geneva conference on the law of the sea, 5.6.1958. Also UD: 31.11/60/VII, Permanent Delegation to NATO to Foreign Ministry, 1.8.1958, and NA: FO371/134978, Brimelow to Roberts, 30.7.1958.
- 63 NARA: RG59/740B.022/8-2658, Paris Embassy to Secretary of State, 26.8.1958.
- 64 NA: FO371/134982, Gilchrist to FO, 28.8.1958.
- 65 NA: FO371/134983, Gilchrist to FO, 31.8.1958. Also Ólafsson, *Saga landhelgismálsins*, 295-297.
- 66 NA: ADM306/8, Earl of Selkirk, First Lord of the Admiralty, to First Sea Lord, 31.8.1958.
- 67 See Gunnar M. Magnúss, *Landhelgisbókin* (Reykjavík, 1959), 94-119.
- 68 NA: FO371/134985, Brimelow minute, 3.9.1958. Also Davis, *Iceland Extends Its Fisheries Limits*, 126.
- 69 Foreign Ministry Historical Collection, National Archives of Iceland, Reykjavík [hereafter ThÍSÖ]: 1993-3-1, Kristinn Guðmundsson, Ambassador in London, to Foreign Ministry, 8.10.1958.
- 70 Papers of Sir Andrew Gilchrist, Chirchill College, Cambridge. GILC12/C(1): Gilchrist to Leslie Milne, 6.8.1958.

- 71 NA: FO371/134982, Gilchrist to FO, 29.8.1958.
- 72 Thorgeir Thorgeirsson, *Ja – thessi heimur. Veraldarsaga og reisubók Péturs Karlssonar Kidson* (Reykjavík, 1984), 142.
- 73 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 84-85.
- 74 BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading: News bulletin, 13:00, 3.9.1958.
- 75 The American ambassador was inclined to think that the demonstration was more or less spontaneous. See NARA: RG59/740B.022/9-358, Muccio, Reykjavík, to Secretary of State, 3.9.1958. Also author's interviews with Thór Whitehead, 29.12.2001, and Hilmar Foss, 5.9.2002, and *Thjóðviljinn* (Icelandic daily), 3.9.1958.
- 76 NA: FO371/143104, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 13.1.1959.
- 77 NA-CAN: RG25/3993/10009-40, Canadian Embassy in Oslo to Ottawa, 23.10.1959.
- 78 Private papers of Hilmar Foss, Reykjavík [hereafter HF]: Foss to Mangeot, 22.8.1959.
- 79 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 89-90.
- 80 For the former comment, see HF: Foss to Mangeot, 15.9.1959. For the latter, see Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 114-115.
- 81 NA: FO371/143107, Brimelow minute, 11.3.1959.
- 82 NA: FO371/134963, Gilchrist to FO, 13.5.1958.
- 83 NA: FO371/134978, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 24.7.1958.
- 84 NA: FO371/134985, Gilchrist to FO, 5.9.1958.
- 85 NA: FO371/134991, Gilchrist memorandum, 4.10.1958.
- 86 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 102.
- 87 *Guardian and Daily Telegraph*, 25.5.1973.
- 88 Lord Strang, *The Foreign Office* (London, 1955), 117.
- 89 See Sasson Sofer, 'Being a "Pathetic Hero" in International Politics: The Diplomat as a Historical Actor,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2001, 107-112.